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school for pregnant and parenting teens

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"Dear Tupac, you speak to me": Recruiting Hip Hop as Curriculum at a School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens

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Heidi L. Hallman

Abstract:

This article provides a rich representation of how in-school practices that recruit students' "out-of-school" literacies, such as hip hop, can be used as critical bridges in students' learning. Hip hop, conceptualized in this article as an "out-of-school" literacy, works as a vehicle for curricular change at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens. In so doing, such literacy learning can be a tool for social action. Because the literacy learning of "at risk" students, as the students who attend Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens are labeled, is often described through remedial or basic skills models of instruction, it is imperative that researchers document curricular change that challenges prevailing assumptions about the learning of "at risk" students.

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Abstract:

This article provides a rich representation of how in-school practices that recruit students’ “out-of-school” literacies, such as hip-hop, can be used as critical bridges in students’ learning. Hip-hop, conceptualized in this article as an “out-of-school” literacy, works as a vehicle for curricular change at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens. In so doing, such literacy learning can be a tool for social action. Because the literacy learning of “at risk” students, as the students who attend Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens are labeled, is often described through remedial or basic skills models of instruction, it is imperative that researchers document curricular change that challenges prevailing assumptions about the learning of “at risk” students.

“Dear Tupac, You speak to me.”

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Dear Tupac,
You speak to me.
Your music makes me remember the good times when life wasn't hard and there weren't
responsibilities.
But even now you tell me that I can do it and be a good mom.
I miss you.

By LaTasha Jones

LaTasha Jones'¹ poem to Tupac Shakur is one of several poems that students at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens wrote to hip-hop icons during a writer's workshop period. LaTasha's poem to Tupac illustrates how hip-hop became a motivating tool for students to talk about who they were as teen mothers and adolescents, and recruiting hip-hop as curriculum also afforded the students at Eastview the opportunity to grow as literate individuals. Such an opportunity is imperative at schools such as Eastview, given popular conceptions of teen mothers as “at risk” as a consequence of bearing a child at a young age. The “at risk”² lens has often meant that teen mothers have experienced a “basic skills”-focused (Knapp & Turnball, 1990)

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

² Therefore, the status of the “at risk” student as used throughout this article extends beyond the pregnant and parenting teen and includes all students whose literacy learning “mismatches” school-based literacy, a term that aligns with teachers' monologic teaching script and students' limited opportunity and participation in tasks beyond recitation and memorization of facts (see Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995).

literacy curriculum. In this article, I illustrate how Bob Schaefer, an English educator at Eastview school, aimed to challenge such conceptions when hip-hop became curriculum in his English class. As such, Bob and his students enlisted their “unofficial” out-of-school literacies for in-school literacy learning, challenging conceptions of what is possible for “at risk” students. In exploring hip-hop as curriculum in a school for pregnant and parenting teens, I engage with the following questions:

- How did hip-hop enter the classroom at Eastview? What curricular structures made this possible? What were the roles of teacher and student?
- What did recruiting hip-hop as curriculum allow students at Eastview to do? What identities did hip-hop make possible for students to take on as teenage mothers/ pregnant teens, and as readers and writers? How was hip-hop aligned with using literacy as a tool for social action?

To address these questions, I present examples of classroom practices that recruit hip-hop as curriculum.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Curriculum for pregnant and parenting teens, a specific population of “at risk” students, has historically been perceived of as very different from (i.e., not as “academically rigorous” as) curriculum intended for students who are not parenting (Luttrell, 2003; Pillow, 2004; Zachry, 2005). Despite undergoing recent reform in an effort to provide challenging curriculum and instruction for their students, Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, the site of this article’s investigation, still stands as a school synonymous with public perceptions of what schools for pregnant teens are like; Eastview retains the stigma of a school that “teaches students how to be

parents.” The stigma of being a school focused on parenting rather than academics does not exist because Eastview has been unsuccessful in adopting rigorous standards of academic excellence. Rather, it exists because of the taken-for-granted and simplistic understandings in the United States of the relationships among teen motherhood, schooling, and academic success ([Author, 2007]; Pillow, 2004).

By naming hip-hop as an “out-of-school” literacy, it is recognized that Eastview students’ knowledge and affiliation with hip-hop is a critical part of their lives, yet the way hip-hop is positioned in adolescents’ lives aligns with spaces considered “separate” from school. Recognizing that sites like students’ affiliation with hip-hop may be critical places from which to engage meaningful learning, researchers and educators have begun to explore how such sites may be successfully recruited for in-school learning.

Literacy curriculum for adolescents

The field of literacy studies has undergone great shifts in the past decades (Alvermann & McLean, 2007; Gee, 2000). Responding to these shifts has led scholars in the field in new directions, and one such direction has been the movement away from a conception of a singular, “school-based” literacy to a recognition of literacy as “multiple” (New London Group, 1996). Literacy as “multiple” suggests that “modes of representation [are] much broader than language alone...[and that they are situated within] increasing local diversity and global connectedness” (Cope & Kalantzis, pp. 5-6). The term *multiliteracies* stresses the importance of context and the role it plays in acknowledging the legitimacy of multiple literacy practices. “School-based” literacy, then, has become just one way to understand students’ literate competencies within the boundaries of school.

The shift in the way literacy has been conceptualized holds implications for educators, as well. Recently, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), a professional organization influential to literacy educators, released a policy research brief (2007) that very clearly outlines the idea that adolescents draw from various literacies both inside and outside of school. This research brief also boldly states that teachers often “devalue, ignore, or censor adolescents’ extracurricular literacies, assuming these literacies are morally suspect, raise controversial issues, or distract adolescents from more important work” (p. 3). NCTE’s influential position on adolescent literacy has had a part in prompting educators to examine how “school-based” understandings of literacy are employed within their classrooms and how these school-based literacies “match/mismatch” those literacies that students are proficient in beyond the walls of the classroom. The term “out-of-school” literacies, then, has been used to describe those literacy practices that students are proficient in beyond school, and many of these out-of-school literacies involve new technologies, new media, and literacies that students use in the family, community, or with regard to popular culture (Dyson, 1997). As a result, negotiating the boundaries between “out-of-school” literacies and “school-based” (sometimes called “in-school”) literacy practices hinges, in part, on teachers’ recognition of the places and out-of-school settings, such as homes, after-school programs, and community-based organizations, where “literacy flourishes” (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p. 2).

Literacy research has documented what kinds of reading and writing adolescents engage in outside of the classroom and many scholars have discussed a range of literacy activities, including adolescents’ involvement in “tagging,” (MacGillivray & Saucedo Curwen, 2007), adolescent girls’ writing (Finders, 1997; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004) and

adolescents' online writing and reading (Black, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Studies specifically focused on the link between literacy and adolescents' identity in these out-of-school spaces have greatly increased educators' understanding of their students as literate individuals. Yet, Hull and Schultz (2002) recognize that in some ways the "distinction between in-school and out-of-school sets up a false dichotomy" (p.12). They note that by stressing the physical divide between home and school, scholars may be ignoring "important conceptual dimensions that more readily account for successful learning or its absence" (p. 12). Moreover, the focus on the physical divide may lead researchers to an oversimplified understanding of the context of home or school as pre-determining learning possibilities.

This "divide" also points to the limited number of portraits of classroom practice that are successfully recruiting adolescents' out-of-school literacies for school-based gains. Though some literacy researchers (e.g., Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004) have argued for a connection between out-of-school literacies and in-school literacy practices, links between the school domain and out-of-school domains remain tenuous, as conflicting opinions about how "transferable" out-of-school literacy practices really are to in-school spaces remain. Out-of-school literacy practices, particularly when labeled as "non-mainstream," have been understood as entailing awareness and critique of societal power structures (Mahiri, 2004) that are not necessarily endorsed within the school context. Further, Alvermann and Heron (2001) remind us that we, as educators, "risk burying youth's pleasures by exposing them to adult critique" (p. 122). And, there is also a risk that educators may

destroy youth's affiliation with out-of-school texts when we bring them into academic discussion in the classroom (O'Brien, 1998).

"Out-of-school" literacies, social action, and teaching for social justice

Literacy research that has embraced a concept of *multiliteracies* has been thought of by some (Cherland & Harper, 2007) as advocacy research specifically directed at redesigning the future for and with those students who are labeled "at risk." The goal of redesigning these students' futures is itself a form of social action, a term that is synonymous with working toward change, whether this change be pursued in classrooms or schools (e.g., Heffernan & Lewison, 2005), in community centers/ arenas (Cushman & Emmons, 2002), in families (Rogers, 2003), or in individuals themselves (Jones, 2006). A critical component of social action is its relationship to teaching for social justice, a philosophy aligned with the promotion of justice and equity for all learners (Bigelow, et al., 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Bigelow et al. (1994) describe teaching for social justice as a "social and pedagogical vision that is characterized by several interlocking components that together comprise what we call a social justice classroom" (p. 4). These components emphasize that school must be about the students' lives as well as about a particular subject and must be participatory in nature, inviting the students to question and challenge curriculum (Bigelow et al., 1994). Jones (2006) argues that the "action" that students make from such an environment must begin with not only a questioning of curriculum but an inherent questioning of identity.³

³ The term *identity* as used in this article emphasizes that one's position within society is constituted both by inhabiting a position of agent and subject. Identities always move between these two positions and are variable, multivocal, and interactive, as opposed to coherent and static (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

A *multiliteracies* framework endorses the view that individuals' use of their native language, discourse, and identity are keys to the promotion of social action (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Freire and Macedo (1987) specifically stress that one's literacy, no matter how "non-mainstream," must not be viewed as antagonistic to the dominant culture and/ or dominant forms of literacy. Rather, recruiting individuals' literacy and "authentic voice" to transact with *word* and *world* is critical in viewing literacy as a tool for social action rather than a merely a decontextualized skill set. Scholars who have argued for literacy as a tool for social action (Cintron, 1991; Mahiri, 1998) have also embraced a Freirian concept of action and reflection (Freire, 1970), thereby urging individuals to use their literacy—no matter how "non-mainstream"—as a tool for social action. These scholars, like those who stress the relevance of students' out-of-school literacies, have sought ways to draw upon youth's "authentic voice" in efforts to promote classroom learning. Students' questioning and deconstruction of their own identity is evidence of social action (Jones, 2006). Though some may argue that the venue of an individual classroom is a small one for real "change" to occur, one's immediate, local environment may be the first place where individuals can enact real change (Freire, 1970).

Teacher's choices matter in enacting literacy as a tool for social action. In order to recruit students' out-of-school literacies, teachers must embrace a view of literacy as *multiple*. Further, teachers must successfully guide students toward recognizing how their "authentic voice" and identity can move them to produce counter-narratives (Yosso, 2005) to the way they are dominantly portrayed by societal discourses. Students' production of counter-narratives is further evidence of using literacy for social action.

Recruiting hip-hop as curriculum affords students the opportunity to grow as literate individuals. Because “the cultures and identity-making practices in which young people participate are overlapping and multidimensional,” (Alvermann & McLean, 2007, p. 10), it is critical that successful school practices that support the bridge between the out-of-school and in-school learning are evidenced.

Hip-hop as curriculum

Hip-hop, now considered an almost universal genre of music, emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (George, 1998; Rose, 1994) and held an association in its time of emergence with political stances and Black culture. Some critics (e.g., religious groups, politicians, women’s groups) have argued that this original orientation has been subsumed within commercialism and violent and/ or misogynistic messages and images. Despite criticism, however, hip-hop is argued by scholars (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2000; Powell, 1991, Rose, 1991) as the “representative voice of urban youth.”

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2000) and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) have argued for the use of hip-hop in the English/ Language Arts classroom. Through observation and study, they illustrate how “hip-hop music [can] be used as a vehicle for [these] urban youth to develop and express their critical literacy skills which they [can] then transfer to other ‘literary texts’” (p. 2). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2000) argue that hip-hop’s use in the classroom has several facets, including: 1) Hip-hop as a cultural frame that can aid students in their understanding of material presented during classroom instruction, 2) Hip-hop and rap music as aligning with urban youth culture, and 3) Hip-hop and rap music as valid textual artifacts worthy of study. Furthermore, these researchers discuss how hip-hop, when paired with a study of canonical texts in a high

school English classroom, can push students toward sophisticated and complex understandings of their society and their identity as individuals who are a part of that society.

Several other curricular initiatives that incorporate hip-hop into the school curriculum are noteworthy. The project *Rhythm, Rhyme, Results* works to produce supplementary educational music that adheres to federal curriculum mandates in core subject areas. This music uses tenets of the hip-hop genre to craft engaging music for classrooms. A description of the *Rhythm, Rhyme, Results* project and goals, as well as a sampling of their music can be found at www.educationalrap.com. Another hip-hop initiative comes from the work of the group the *Funkamentals*. Their CD, entitled, “By Any Means Necessary,” uses the concept of re-working hip-hop music with new, school-based lyrics to teach academics to adolescents. The group’s huge success has inspired educators nationwide to recognize the importance of engaging urban youth in learning through hip-hop. In a statement published in the Arizona Daily Wildcat online edition, *Funkamentals*’ co-founder Wade Colwell stated, “What we’re trying to do is re-integrate music and creative expression into the traditional, academic disciplines. You can utilize the arts to teach mathematics and science, very technical subjects.” Positioning hip-hop initiatives such as *Rhythm, Rhyme, and Results* and the *Funkamentals* as successful projects created for in-school learning by recruiting hip-hop gives educators hope that such an endeavor is indeed possible and productive.

Understandings of hip-hop’s use as a part of the English curriculum (see Jocson, 2006; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), as well as initiatives that feature hip-hop as a tool for learning (e.g., *Rhythm, Rhyme, Results*; the *Funkamentals*) have led to new and

innovative ways of including hip-hop in school. Eastview's participation in this trajectory adds another layer to successful initiatives that recruit hip-hop in the English classroom.

Method

Context of study: Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens

Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, part of the Lakeville Alternative Schools Project, was founded in the early 1980's, and is still, in 2008, considered a "unique" school in the Midwestern community of Lakeville. It is the only school in the city devoted entirely to educating teens who also are mothers. Eastview's program is similar in many ways to other programs for teen mothers in the United States, for educating this population of students has been, and continues to be, a mandate of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.

Prior to Title IX, pregnant and parenting teens were both officially and unofficially excluded from participation in public schools (Pillow, 2004). Though many school districts in the United States have responded to Title IX by creating single-sex schools to serve the needs of pregnant and parenting teens, this has sometimes forced this population of students to choose between a separate school with daycare facilities and a school that holds the status of a "regular" high school, the latter being perhaps the only access to a college preparatory curriculum for pregnant and parenting students.

Eastview, as a school, has educated teen mothers for over twenty years and during the time of my study in the 2005-2006 school year, there were between thirty and forty students, all between the ages of twelve and nineteen, enrolled at any one time. The students who participated in the study self-identified as African American, Hmong,

Mexican American, Latina, and White. A “three school semester” (approximately one and one-half years) limit for enrollment existed at Eastview during the time of my study, and as a result, I, a white graduate student, interacted, in the role of participant-observer, with many of the students throughout part of their pregnancy as well as after the birth of their child. Other students enrolled at Eastview for only one quarter. At the end of the school year several students graduated, while others returned to their “home” high school, the high school they attended before enrolling at Eastview.

Bob Schaefer, the English teacher at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, was an essential figure in my research at Eastview. Bob began teaching in the Lakeville Public School District—the district in which Eastview is situated—in 1986. First placed as an English teacher at one of the city’s four large high schools, Bob quickly assumed the position as Eastview’s English teacher. The position started as a temporary one, and Bob assumed he would eventually return to a mainstream high school. However, twenty years later, Bob, a white male in his late 40’s, was still teaching at Eastview.

Data generation

To investigate how hip-hop was recruited as curriculum at Eastview, I draw on data collection from a larger study investigating the literacy learning of students at Eastview School. Data generation consisted of taking fieldnotes, audiotaping and transcribing transcripts of English class sessions, interviewing five students about their own literacy practices as well as the practices that involved literacy in the lives of their children, interviewing three teachers at Eastview about pedagogical practices and choices in the English classroom, and collecting artifacts related to the literacy learning of

students at Eastview. The larger research study consisted of approximately 250 hours of classroom participation and observation and these hours were typically spent observing three hours of English classes, two to three mornings a week.

The fieldnotes I took during my observation at Eastview aimed to document the “content domain” of curricular units. The content domain, for example, included notes about the assignments the students were given, the duration of these assignments, and the tools used for the completion of the assignments. My fieldnotes also recorded the interactions students had with teachers about the content the teachers presented in class. While fieldnotes did not aim to capture word-for-word every exchange in the class sessions, they often complemented the word-for-word exchanges captured through the audiotaped class sessions. The documentation of teacher/ student and student/ student exchanges in the classroom was honed through the audiotaping of fifteen class sessions during the research study as a whole. Audiotaping allowed me a way to pay close attention to the dialogue between teacher and students and many of these excerpts of talk are featured as data in this article.

In-depth interviews with five students and three teachers helped me contextualize the interactions I was seeing in the classroom. Attention to the students’ and teachers’ narratives as told to me in interviews pointed to the connections these individuals had to particular worldviews that valued ways of being, knowing, believing, and acting in the world (Gee, 1999; 2001). Furthermore, the narratives assisted me in making connections to data collected in the English classroom.

Finally, collecting artifacts that documented students’ literacy learning assisted me in telling a story of the literacy practices at Eastview. This article primarily draws on

the texts students produced in class, and in particular, journal writing, narrative, and poetic texts. These texts serve as a way to understand the connection between how students drew on their “out-of-school” literacies while participating in “school-based” literacy practices.

Data analysis

My analysis of data was recursive and inductive (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Throughout the study, I reviewed the data I had collected (fieldnotes, transcribed interviews, transcribed class sessions, and student artifacts) and made annotations regarding how these data reflected the literacy learning of Eastview students. In so doing, I established thematic identifications, which then became the starting place for codes and subcodes. For example, categories that arose from these codes included pregnancy and literacy, “out-of-school” literacies, and sharing literacy with one’s child.

Categories were also coded in a deductive manner during the process of data analysis. The literature cited previously in this article that addressed “out-of-school” literacies, specifically, and adolescent literacy, more generally, honed my efforts to construct criteria for understanding how hip-hop, as an “out-of-school” literacy, was recruited as curriculum. Deductive codes helped me articulate how Eastview’s relationship with and understanding of hip-hop referenced how researchers in the area of literacy education (e.g., Moje, 2000; Lalik, Dellinger, & Druggish, 2003) have conceptualized integrating non-mainstream literacies into school contexts.

I was able to check the reliability of my data categories through sharing sections of data with colleagues who had experience with qualitative research in classroom contexts. My colleagues read several excerpts from transcribed interviews as well as

transcribed class sessions from Eastview's English classroom. They were able, as readers, to annotate the data and construct their own codes and subcodes for the data. The categories that multiple readers constructed were then compared and refined into my final categories of analysis.

As I honed my data analysis categories, it became evident that the literacy success of Eastview students was largely dependent on recruiting "out-of-school" literacies for in-school learning. Sub-themes within this broader theme also became evident, and I was able to interrogate the sub-themes as evidenced within the artifacts that students produced in class. Specifically, I was able to examine three "in-school" literacy practices as particularly successful in recruiting students' "out-of-school" literacies: journal writing, narrative writing, and poetry writing. In my findings, I draw on these forms of students' writing, as well as the discussions they had with their teacher, Bob Schaefer, in order to view how hip-hop became pivotal in their success with these school-based literacy practices.

Recruiting Hip-Hop as Curriculum

In Eastview's English classroom, journal writing, narrative writing, and poetry writing were the three curricular structures through which hip-hop entered the classroom. Recruiting hip-hop for in-school literacy learning illuminated four themes: 1) Reflecting on social issues, 2) Becoming "active agents" through hip-hop, 3) Recruiting hip-hop as a site for in-school literacy learning, and 4) Viewing hip-hop as a "critical bridge" between out-of-school and in-school literacies. These four themes will be explored in depth throughout the remainder of the article.

Reflecting on social issues

While many teachers consider it important to create and use curriculum that resonates with students' lives, the mechanisms by which this occurs in school vary tremendously from school to school and teacher to teacher. Writing, specifically journal writing, or "journaling," has typically been a school practice linked to the exploration of students' personal views and opinions and has been a forum that English teachers use to bridge students' lives and their literacy (Elbow, 1981). Journaling is often contrasted with what various scholars in composition studies have termed "essayist literacy," or literacy that aims for the use of a certain register of language in writing. Journaling, as I consider its use at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, is an in-school practice that is well-positioned to recruit students' "out of-school" literacies.

Students at Eastview participated frequently in journal writing. Often the journal writing prompts that guided students' writing were linked to school activities and/ or field trips in order to help students in identifying a "jumping off place" for their writing. For example, the journal writing prompt that students received after seeing a Rennie Harris pure movement performance⁴ asked them to think about hip-hop. More specifically, the journal writing prompt asked the students to respond to the following question: "What are the values of hip-hop?"

After passing out the journal prompt to students, Bob Schaefer led his students to think about the prompt by noting that the students could go about answering the question in many different ways. The first reaction he received from a student questioned whether

⁴ In 1992 Rennie Harris founded Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM) to preserve and share his appreciation of hip-hop culture. RHPM does extensive outreach activities including dance workshops, lecture-demonstrations, and discussions. These programs aim to engender dialogue about racism and teach about hip-hop culture (see www.rhpm.org).

she had to write about the Rennie Harris performance. Ayanna Bemis, a sophomore at Eastview, questioned her teacher by saying, “So, you’re saying that we don’t have to write about the performance? ‘Cause I think hip-hop is about dress.”

This was Bob’s first indication that his students had direction for their writing. He responded to Ayanna’s comment with what he hoped would prompt other students. Bob directed his comment to the class when he said, “Hmmm...that’s interesting how you (pointing to Ayanna) think of hip-hop more through its style than the music.”

Star Pates, an Eastview freshman, pitched in next and authoritatively said, “Well, you know, it’s both. It’s all of that.”

“Well, write that down! That’s good.” Bob was pleased that his students were excited about the topic.

LaShaundra Goodwin spoke up next by saying, “And it’s about Black people.”

Bob was quick to respond to LaShaundra’s comment and said, “I’m surprised that you said that. Do you think that some people might think that’s stereotypical?”

LaShaundra shrugged. “Maybe I can say that it started with black people and they brought it to others.”

“Yes. Write that down,” said Bob.

The conversation closed and students turned to their writing. Bob reiterated the goals of the assignment by saying, “It’s up to you. You all have different ideas and I want you to write those down.”

The journal prompt asking students about the values of hip-hop was Bob’s opening to his students to explore their relationship to hip-hop, and in many ways, Bob invited students to think through their relationship to hip-hop beyond the Rennie Harris

performance. Hip-hop, as a music genre, shaped Bob's classroom at Eastview in many ways. Almost everyday students played CDs of their choice, and the music of their choice included artists such as Tupac Shakur, Lil' Kim, The Notorius B.I.G., as well as 50 Cent and Aaliyah. Students knew this music inside and out, and often sung along to the lyrics. Many students wore tee-shirts featuring the icons previously listed or would doodle on their paper phrases such as, "Tupac still lives." Hip-hop's presence within Bob's classroom was huge.

After having the conversation about the Rennie Harris pure movement performance, students wrote for the class period and some finished their journal entries that day. Taneka, Ayanna, and LaTasha shared their writing with me the following day and their views resonated with how hip-hop, to them, referenced their own lives yet also spoke to the larger context of the world and the culture they were living in. Taneka Graff's writing situated hip-hop as a tool for understanding the world. Hip-hop was indeed positioned in Taneka's writing as a vehicle for social change as well as individual inquiry. Taneka's response is featured below:

Hip hop to me is music that entertains the mind. Hip hop can be about money and violence but the music I like is about real things. Like when the two towers came down and artists came together and wrote a song about the tragedy. The song gave tribute to all those whose lives were lost. Hip hop makes me think and question things going on around me.

Taneka's response embraced hip-hop as a platform from which to comment on the world around her. When she says, "Hip hop makes me think and questions things going on around me" and then references 9/11, we understand hip-hop as a vehicle that allows

Taneka to position herself within the world.

In her writing, Ayanna Bemis also responded to world events and how she is positioned within them. Like Taneka, she distances hip-hop from violence by linking its power with personal inspiration. Ayanna's response is as follows:

Hip hop is more than music. It's also about dress. And hip hop is a cultural dance that started among young African Americans who expressed their feelings through their body movements. Hip hop makes me feel inspired. When I was a kid I'd make up dances and it was so inspiring. I'd express myself in a hard core way that wasn't dangerous.

LaTasha Jones' journal entry features the personal relevance of hip-hop by noting the song "Dear Mama" by Tupac Shakur. The song, Shakur's tribute to his mother, was a favorite of the students at Eastview as it featured the strength of a single mother.

LaTasha's journal entry is featured below:

Hip hop expresses feelings that cannot be expressed just one way. I know because the television would educate me about things I didn't even know about. Even before I knew what the words were saying the sound sounded so good to me. Then, when I was older, songs like "Dear Mama" by Tupac touched me.

In the three journal entries, students draw on their out-of-school experiences, and all three students reference events in their lives that exist beyond school boundaries. Although the journal prompt was connected to a performance that students viewed as "school affiliated," the activity positioned hip-hop as more than an out-of-school activity. Instead, it effectively bridged an out-of-school literacy with in-school practices.

Becoming “active agents” through hip-hop

One struggle that educators at Eastview continually faced was how to assist students in becoming what they considered “active agents” in their lives. Despite portraits the American public at-large holds of teen mothers (see Pillow, 2004), students at Eastview did not feel that they were positioned as victims as the result of bearing a child at a young age. In fact, many students cited the lives of their children as the reason they were still in school, as their children made them “take responsibility,” as one student, LaShaundra Goodwin, told me. LaShaundra’s comment recognized that teen mothers had agency in the form of “taking responsibility” for their lives, yet, at the same time, their actions pushed up against dominant portraits of teenage mothers.

Viewing the ways that Taneka, Ayanna, and LaTasha critique hip-hop in their journal writing, we also witness evidence of literacy as a tool for social action. In the journal writing activity, Eastview students use their affiliation with hip-hop to develop a sense of agency while still working within the recognition of the “extra-local context” of the society in which they live. For example, Taneka juxtaposes her view of society’s image of hip-hop with her view of hip-hop when writing, “Hip hop can be about money and violence but the music I like is about real things.” Ayanna clearly denies that hip-hop is only a music genre when she says, “Hip hop is more than music. It’s also about dress.” Students’ strong assertions reinforce the prominence of their enactment of action and agency through their participation in these literacy practices. Journal writing about hip-hop, or the “in-school” literacy practice students engage with, became the curricular structure that assisted students in exploring the relationship between individual agency and how they, as teen mothers, are perceived by society. Writing about these tensions

encouraged students to inhabit a position of using literacy as a tool for social change by exploring who they were as individuals.

Another assignment, referred to throughout Eastview as the “Pregnancy Essay,” prompted students to write a narrative about the experience of being a pregnant or parenting teen. The Pregnancy Essay was structured through a series of prompts that asked students to reflect on and articulate their feelings about their pregnancy. Due to the very personal nature of the assignment, the Pregnancy Essay was perhaps one of the most difficult assignments in Eastview’s language arts curriculum and many students used the essay as a way to talk through unresolved issues related to their experience of pregnancy. Figure 1 depicts the handout students were given as a guide in writing their narrative. See Appendix 1.

The prompts for writing the second and third paragraphs of the narrative drew students into questioning the choices that they faced as pregnant teens, and this probed the “action” that they, as young women, were asked to take in regard to their pregnancy. Several students, when writing about the choices they faced as related to pregnancy, used hip-hop as a frame for discussing their feelings. Krystal Berns, a senior at Eastview, used Eminem’s⁵ “Stan” as a way to structure her narrative. Though she knew many of the lyrics to “Stan,” Krystal searched online and asked Bob for permission to use the lyrics as a guide for her narrative. At Bob’s encouragement, Krystal used the chorus of the song “Stan” to frame the two verses that she wrote. Creating her own verses that related to her pregnancy experience, Krystal’s final version of her Pregnancy Essay read as follows:

⁵ Eminem’s breakthrough came in 1999 with the release of *The Slim Shady LP*. “Stan,” the third single of *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000) has been revered as one of the greatest rap songs of all time.

“Krystal”

(Chorus)

My tea's gone cold, I'm wondering what I got out of bed at all
The morning rain clouds up my window and I can't see at all
And even if I could it'd all be grey, but your picture on my wall
It reminds me that it's not so bad
It's not so bad

1st verse:

Dear Mom, I told you I was pregnant and I know you were mad
I tried to tell you I'd be fine, stay in school, and stay in touch with my baby's dad
I did what I said I'd do and now life has moved on
My little daughter is now nine months old and growing up fast
Maybe you thought I couldn't do it but here I am

(Repeat chorus)

2nd verse:

Dear Mom, I think you are proud of me even though I'm a teen mom
I'm still with Manuel and that's a good thing
Jewel's got a mom and dad and you know it's more than I had
I'm glad you are here for me through good times and bad

Sincerely yours, Krystal

Other students entered the discussion of using lyrics to frame their Pregnancy Essay and Star Pates, a freshman at Eastview, mentioned how Usher's⁶ “Confessions, Part 2” discusses the issue of unplanned pregnancy. Like Krystal, Star used Usher's music as a model to guide her writing. Usher's “Confessions, Part 2,” like Eminem's “Stan,” focuses on the inner dialogue of one person thinking through the choices he faces as related to his life. Star's narrative follows Usher's song as a model and speaks to her own deliberation about what choices she faces as related to her pregnancy. Star also tells

⁶ The success of Usher's 2004 breakthrough album, *Confessions*, coincided with the time I spent as a researcher at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens. Usher's album had three singles inside Hot 100's top ten. Like Aaliyah, who is also discussed later in this article, Usher is not clearly a “hip-hop” icon, but may be affiliated with the hip-hop genre through his work with Jermaine Dupri, Lil' Jon, and others.

readers what choices she feels she is “expected” to make. Star’s Pregnancy essay is entitled “Star’s Confessions, Part 1” and reads as follows:

Star’s Confessions, Part 1

These are my confessions
Just when I thought I said all I can say
I found out I was four months pregnant and I was only fourteen.
I was like, really? But I also knew why.

I was mad, mostly at me.
My mom wondered what I was thinking but she said she’d be there for me.
My man wasn’t so sure but he said “we’ll deal.”

These are my confessions
Just when I thought I said all I can say
I knew that I’d keep my baby and accept the responsibility.
People expected me to now be an adult.
They kept telling me how hard it will be and I am listening,
But I say that sometimes life throws things at you.

I am now eight months and it’s gonna be a boy.
I’m thinking it will be hard once he’s born but I am prepared.
Now it’s not just me. It’s him and me.
These are my confessions.

Star’s poetic narrative follows the style of Usher’s “Confessions, Part 2” in that it uses the same refrain (These are my confessions. Just when I thought I said all I can say). Star was very excited to share her narrative with her classmates once she finished writing it and as she read it aloud, she set the lyrics to the same rhythm as used in Usher’s song.

The position of “active agent” is highlighted throughout both Krystal’s and Star’s narratives, as both stress what others have told them about how life will be after becoming a mother. In “Star’s Confessions, Part 1,” Star takes other’s words of advice seriously, yet strives for her own understanding of her life. Krystal challenges her mother’s expectations when she says, “maybe you thought I couldn’t do it but here I am.”

As in “Stan” and “Confessions, Part 2,” the dilemma between the struggle of the individual and society’s expectations of the individual are highlighted.

The Pregnancy Essays written by Krystal and Star stress the careful balance between the “individual as agent” and the “individual as shaped by society” (Holland, et al., 1998), and it is the music of Eminem and Usher that facilitates both students’ ability to make an argument. These two narratives provide another example of how hip-hop is relevant to the English curriculum at Eastview, as students seek ways to recruit their out-of-school affiliation with hip-hop for in-school practices.

Understanding the way that Star and Krystal have articulated the balance between “individual as agent” and “individual as shaped by society” within their narrative reaches to the heart of what Freire and Macedo (1987) argue as true emancipation, for this balance urges individuals to recognize how their own literacy and affiliations can be powerful tools in promoting change in their own lives as well as change in society. Through recruiting students’ use of a genre, such as hip-hop, it becomes possible to witness how Eastview’s English curriculum harnesses students’ “authentic voices” for in-school literacy practices. Furthermore, the success of Bob Schaefer in facilitating authentic learning experiences for students provides a portrait of an educator who is truly able to blur what Alvermann and McLean (2007) call “the bogus divide between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices” (p.10).

What counts as school writing? Recruiting hip-hop as a site for in-school literacy learning

Blurring the boundaries between what is considered an out-of-school literacy and an in-school literacy practice urges educators to reconsider the goals of school literacy

practices. On several occasions, students at Eastview asked if writing about activities outside of school would “count” for school credit and this, in turn, prompted me to consider how students were viewing the activities they participated in within the classroom as completely separate from their lives outside of school.

Ayanna’s poem to Aaliyah⁷ emerged from another writing activity in Bob’s classroom. Bob featured the “letter poem,” an assignment that asked students to write a letter to someone in a poetic form. The assignment guidelines are featured in Figure 2. See Appendix 2.

At first, many students expected there to be guidelines concerning the person to whom their letter was addressed. Did it have to be someone famous? Did it have to be a living person? Bob told the students that there were no specifications concerning to whom the letter was addressed; it really could be a letter to a person of their choice.

The first student to get an idea of who to address her letter to was Keisha Jackson, a sophomore at Eastview. She proclaimed to the class that she was going to write a letter to her unborn child because then “[she] could read it to him once he was born.” Other students who were pregnant thought that Keisha’s idea sounded good, and two students, along with Keisha, started their letters.

In response to Keisha’s letter, Ayanna said, “Well, if you are going to write about someone not born I’m writing about someone dead.” And, at that, she wrote in her

⁷ Aaliyah was a popular R & B singer at the time of her death in August of 2001. Her untimely death in a plane crash subsequently caused many of her fans to memorialize her in significant ways. It is important to note that Aaliyah is not clearly a “hip-hop” icon, but may be affiliated with the hip-hop genre through her work with renowned hip-hop producers such as Timbaland. Aaliyah’s presence at Eastview was huge and it is for this reason that I have chosen to feature her prominently in this article.

notebook, “Dear Aaliyah,” and began her poem. Destiny Greer and LaTasha Jones loved Ayanna’s idea and decided to write their poems to Tupac Shakur.⁸ Poems by Destiny Greer and Ayanna Bemis are featured below. LaTasha Jones’ poem to Tupac is featured at the beginning of the article.

Dear Tupac,
You know how much I love your music.
Your raps make me remember you even though you’re gone.
I know just how you are feeling in the song “Dear Mama.”
I am a mother now and I know how hard it can be.
I know that we’ll meet someday.
Until then, peace.

By Destiny Greer

Dear Aaliyah,
This is Ayanna.
Did you know I had my baby?
Her name is Deandra.
I am your biggest fan.
and have all your CDs, posters, pictures.
I watch all your concerts on T.V.
and like all your songs and videos.
I like how you dress
and like your pretty long hair.
But one day I hope I meet you.

By Ayanna Bemis

Destiny, LaTasha, and Ayanna reference their motherhood in the poems they write. Even though the letter poem featured in Figure 2 does not include references to hip-hop, students were able to draw on their out-of-school affiliation with hip-hop when they crafted their poems by addressing the poems to Aaliyah and Tupac. Unlike the

⁸ Tupac Shakur was tragically killed in September of 1996. He has been revered in the rap and hip-hop world for his outstanding contributions.

journal entry that asked students to feature hip-hop, the letter poem assignment was not specifically directed toward drawing on out-of-school literacies. In the instructions, though, Bob directed students to drawing on their “real” voice by writing, “This should be the ‘real you’ talking. Get close to ‘real feeling’ if you can” (see Figure 2).

Eastview teacher Bob Schaefer’s guidance was a key piece in enabling students to draw on their out-of-school literacies, and his guidance also embraced a key tenet of literacy as a tool for social action: engaging in one’s “authentic voice.” Teen mothers’ understanding of how they can be agents in their lives, fostered through Bob’s encouragement for helping students find their “real” voice, led students to think of an out-of-school voice with which they felt most confident. Due, in part, to Bob’s guidance, students were able to transform curriculum in ways that resonated with their identity both inside and outside of school.

When thinking about the role Bob played in guiding his students, the boundary between the “out-of-school” and in-school remained a site of tension in the letter poem assignment. Bob’s power in asserting that the students use their “real voice,” may, to some, exist as an impossible directive. As Freire and Macedo (1987) remind us, it is individuals themselves that must recognize their own literacy and its possibility. However, Bob exists, like hip-hop itself, as a “critical bridge” at Eastview. These “critical bridges,” as I will soon discuss, are the links between students’ “out-of-school” and in-school literacies.

Viewing hip-hop as a “critical bridge” between out-of-school and in-school literacies

One might question where the figures of Aaliyah and Tupac reside in students’ writing. In some ways, Aaliyah and Tupac exist solely as the figures to whom the

students' letters are addressed and this reflects students' personal admiration for these pop icons. However, Aaliyah and Tupac play a larger role in the students' writing as they allow the two discourses of students' in-school and out-of-school literacies to meet. Aaliyah and Tupac metaphorically exist as "critical bridges" between students' out-of-school and in-school literacies. Like Bob, their presence facilitates Eastview students' ability to successfully recruit hip-hop as curriculum.

The letter poems to Tupac and Aaliyah, written by Destiny Greer and LaTasha Jones, also prominently feature how larger discourses about teen motherhood and the concept of how individual agency interacts with "the extra-local context...including various asymmetrical power relations [and the] documentation of oppressive ideologies and practices" (Kelly, 2000, p.8). For example, LaTasha's poem states that she remembers when "life wasn't hard and there weren't responsibilities. But even now you (Tupac Shakur) tell me that I can do it and be a good mom." The identification of larger discourses within students' poems (the recognition that life now has responsibilities) affirms that society's view of teen motherhood has a great effect on students' writing and literacy. Students like Destiny and LaTasha write about teen pregnancy in the ways that they do, in part, because they are discursively produced by society's vision of teens as mothers. At the same time, though, they work against these definitions and clearly work to produce counter-narratives (Yosso, 2005) about themselves as teen mothers. Situating these counter-narratives within their own literacies and affiliations with hip-hop assists them in articulating their position as individuals. Hip-hop's status as a "critical bridge" between the out-of-school and the in-school allows educators, like Bob, to see the possibility of students' counter-stories become real.

Another “critical bridge” existed in successfully recruiting hip-hop as curriculum at Eastview. Bob Schaefer, Eastview’s English teacher, acted as a bridge between students’ out-of-school lives and students’ in-school participation, an essential component to ensuring students’ school success. In an interview, Bob commented on how his teaching practice had evolved throughout the twenty years he had taught at Eastview and spoke about his views of literacy by saying that “literacy is more about learning how to navigate in the world around you. And less about the skills that they [students] use in my English class.” Telling me also that Eastview’s program had started in the 1980’s as a program focused on a supplemental, basic-skills framework, Bob noted how his instruction had changed throughout the years he had been at Eastview. Highlighting students’ participation in the school’s curriculum, Bob noted that “Eastview did not always allow for really engaging in students’ strengths and interests” and, in the past, was characterized as what he called a “remedial type situation.”

In conversing with Bob, I learned more about how he affiliated with students’ interests. Bob, himself quite knowledgeable about music, said he was “not up on every new song that comes out” yet, at the same time, posed the rhetorical question, “how could someone not have heard of Tupac Shakur?” Bob’s coming-of-age in a different era than his students caused him to playfully joke with them about how he was uninformed about the music they listened to. But, the fact was that Bob was informed about hip-hop to an extent that was very powerful with his students. And, through his knowledge of hip-hop, he was able to contribute to his students’ understanding of the genre. One day, while listening to Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” Bob asked his students to tell him what they thought the song was about.

Looking up, LaShaundra said, “I can’t believe you listen to this (shaking her head). Bob, I can’t believe they let you be a teacher.”

With that statement, Bob laughed. “What are you saying, that teachers can’t be cool?”

“Well, I didn’t say you’re cool. But none of my other teachers know this song.”

Bob’s knowledge of hip-hop, though far less than his students, allowed him to be let into students’ worlds and be privy to students’ strengths and interests. It also positioned him as endorsing, according to Alvermann & McLean (2007), a *new valuing* of adolescents as learners. Acknowledging and recruiting adolescents’ out-of-school literacies—literacies like hip-hop—in ways that challenge a notion of what “schooled literacy” looks like in the classroom places Bob in the unique position of what is the “critical bridge” between the out-of-school and in-school. Like Tupac and Aaliyah, Bob was witness to students’ counter-stories and acted as a sponsor (Brandt, 2001) of hip-hop as curriculum in Eastview’s English class.

At the conclusion of the poetry unit, students displayed their work throughout the remainder of the 2005-2006 school year on a “poetry wall” in Bob’s classroom. One wall of the classroom had been transformed into a vibrant and noticeable corner that featured the students’ work. Every day when students walked into the classroom many would stop at the poetry wall, reading poems they had not yet read and re-reading poems they already knew.

Recognizing how letters to Aaliyah and Tupac actively recruited students’ out-of-school literacies is, of course, a beginning to finding ways that genres such as hip-hop can play a part in re-framing education and curriculum for students, especially those

students who are deemed to be “at risk” of school failure. And, witnessing Bob’s role as a “critical bridge” is but one portrait of an educator who is successfully recruiting students’ out-of-school literacies. However, documenting these successful practices with students at Eastview may be used to leverage future practices for students who are thought about as most in jeopardy of school failure.

**Implications: Challenges for educators in recruiting students’ out-of-school
literacies for in-school learning**

It is clear that students at Eastview felt passionate about recruiting hip-hop for in-school literacy practices. Using hip-hop in the classroom assisted students at Eastview in asserting their agency as teen mothers while also critiquing the discourses that framed them as teen mothers. Students who found what they considered to be their “real” voice were able to use in-school practices, such as journal writing, narrative writing, and poetry writing, to make assertions about the world and their place within it. Because of this, hip-hop as curriculum at Eastview School challenged prevailing notions that students labeled “at risk” learners learn best through a curriculum of “basic skills” void of elements of critical thinking and social critique. Instead, recruiting an “out-of-school” literacy, such as hip-hop, enabled Eastview students to build on their literate competencies as well as investigate their individual agency—a move Freire and Macedo (1987) would consider an essential move toward using literacy for social change.

However, there are still questions concerning where to go from here when recruiting students’ “out-of-school” literacies for in-school practices. As researchers who have studied classroom discourse in the English classroom have shown (Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LaPore, 1995), students who are tracked into “low-ability” or “at

risk” categories tend to have instruction that relies more heavily on skill-based, or remedial-based, instruction than do “high achieving” students. The targeting of skills tends to weaken the link between curriculum presented in the classroom and students’ prior experiences or out-of-school literacies. By refusing to have students engage in authentic literacy activities that build on their literate competencies, teachers are not assisting students in observing the connections their literacy learning has to their own lives and experiences. Since we already know that instruction for adolescents labeled as “low ability” or “at risk” learners tends to be less authentic than instruction for higher-achieving students (Nystrand, 1997), it is especially important that teachers strive to incorporate principles into their pedagogy and curriculum that encourage students to build upon their abilities and out-of-school competencies. And, it is especially important that convincing portraits of these possibilities are documented.

Recruiting hip-hop as curriculum at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens encouraged students to contemplate their role as individuals who have a voice and individual agency. By recruiting an “out-of-school” literacy, such as hip-hop, for in-school practices, educators such as Bob Schaefer witness students’ counter-narratives to the dominant portraits of “at risk” teens. Instead of learning through a “basic skills” model, the recruitment of hip-hop for in-school learning presents a picture of “at risk” students engaged in meaningful literacy practices. Because the population of students who attend Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens has generally been “hidden” from mainstream education, it is important that the taken-for-granted assumptions about these teens’ learning be challenged. By viewing youth’s out-of-school literacies and affiliations as having an impact on classroom practice, students’ learning,

as well as students' construction of their own identities is re-figured. Educators and researchers must continue to work toward classroom-based initiatives that feature recruiting students' "out-of-school" literacies, such as hip-hop, as critical bridges to both social change and "at risk" students' in-school success.

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Appendix 1.

Figure 1. Narrative Essay: The Pregnancy

Narrative Essay: The Pregnancy

Your assignment is to develop a narrative essay based on your pregnancy experience to this point. Narrative writing is storytelling. This can be in the form of a poem, a short story, a novel, or an essay. This particular narration will focus on your pregnancy (pre- or post-natal) and how you plan to deal with your situation. Your essay will be set up as follows:

Your first paragraph will be used to provide background for your pregnancy. Try to answer these questions: How did you find out you were pregnant? Did it take you long to check? What did you do when you found out? Where did you go for verification? Did anyone go with you?

Second paragraph: How did you react when you found out? Who was with you? What was the reaction of others whose opinions are important to you?

Third paragraph: How did you make your decision? Everyone has three choices whether she dismisses them immediately or not: terminating the pregnancy, placing the baby for adoption, or parenting the child. Why did you choose one of these options over the other? How long did it take you to make your decision?

Final paragraph: How do you see yourself after delivery? How will your life be different? How will it be the same? How will it be harder? How will it be easier?

Appendix 2

Figure 2. Letter poem handout

Letter Poem

You will be writing drafts of two letters that will not be for exchanging news, making plans, or asking for something. You're writing to say something interesting, and to say it in a non-prose way.

Step One: Come up with the names of interesting people. Now think of some "thing" or "force" that interests you (wind, dolphin, shadow, etc.) and write down four or five of these.

Now, look at the names you've written down. If you could only write to one of those persons or things, which would it be?

Step Two: Draft a letter to that name.

Begin:

Dear _____,

In your letter, tell _____ who you are and what's on your mind. Do you want advice? Do you want to ask questions about the life or situation of _____?

Do you want to straighten _____ out on a few matters?

Silly or serious?

Distanced or intimate?

Up to You

This should be the "real you" talking. Get close to "real feeling" if you can.

Sign your real name at the bottom.

Work on your draft. Squeeze the draft. Cut extra words out. Replace long with short.

At a point or two where you have the language you like, say more.

Are the parts of your draft in the best order? Read it to check. Make moves if needed.

Read aloud and listen/ look for places to end lines. Look for rhythm and even rhyme (including partial rhymes).